

# Thoughts on Shavuot

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## Inconvenient Truths

### I. The significance of the narrative portions of the Torah

Shavuot celebrates *Matan Torah* – receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. Rambam – Maimonides – explains that, “Hashem selected Israel to be His portion. He crowned them with the commandments and He made known to them the manner of His service...”<sup>1</sup> At Sinai, we received the commandments and through these Hashem taught us how He is to be served. However, the Torah is composed of more than its commandments. It includes an account of creation and it describes important early events in the development of humanity. It includes the history of our nation. It describes the lives of our Patriarchs, the exile in Egypt, our redemption from bondage, Revelation, our travels in the wilderness, and the earliest stages of our conquest of the Land of Israel.

Much of the narrative material is important because it provides the foundation and context for the Torah’s commandments. The account of Revelation, provides the foundation for observance of the commandments. The story of our exile in Egypt and our redemption from bondage provides the context for many *mitzvot* that recall aspects of our exile and redemption.

In short, some of the Torah’s narrative portions are accounted for easily. Other narrative portions are not as readily explained. The Torah provides detailed accounts of episodes in the lives of the Patriarchs. What is the Torah teaching us through these portions?

One purpose of this material is explained by Rambam:

*(And) all that is included in the Scripture (i.e. that) speaks ill of those who possess evil traits and deficient character traits, that denounces their memory, and the praise of the righteous, and their eminence, the intent (of these condemnations and praises) is only as I have said to you. (It is) so that people will go in the way of these (the righteous) and distance themselves from the ways of these (the wicked).*<sup>2</sup>

These comments suggest that some narrative portions of the Torah instruct us in proper values and behaviors that are not explicitly included within the commandments. The Torah teaches about the Patriarchs so that we can emulate them.

***And there was a famine in the land. Avram descended to Egypt to sojourn there because***

<sup>1</sup> Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Avodah Zarah 1:3.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Commentary on the Mishne*, Introduction to Mesechet Avot, chapter 5.

***the famine was intense in the land. (Sefer Beresheit 12:10)***

**II. Criticizing the Patriarchs**

This understanding of the Torah's intent in its treatment of the lives of the Patriarchs impacts our approach to the study of its narratives. The above passage introduces an incident in the life of Avraham and Sarah. Hashem told Avraham that He would give his descendants the Land of Cana'an. Avraham travels through the land that will be the home of his descendants. A famine strikes the land and Avraham travels to Egypt to find relief. He is afraid the Egyptians will covet Sarah. They will kill him and take her. He asks Sarah to participate in a deception. She should identify herself as his sister. Avraham anticipates that suitors will appeal to him – Sarah's supposed brother – for her hand. He will make demands and place other obstacles before each suitor. In this way, he will delay the marriage and escape with Sarah.

Avraham does not foresee Paroh emerging as one of the suitors. Paroh does not need Avraham's permission to take his supposed sister as a wife. He assumes that Sarah's brother will welcome her marriage to the king.<sup>3</sup> He takes Sarah into his household without seeking Avraham's approval. Sarah and Avraham are saved only through Hashem's intervention.

Ramban comments:

*You should know that Avraham our Patriarch inadvertently committed a great sin in bringing his righteous wife into a situation of potential sin*

*because of his fear that they would kill him. He should have trusted in Hashem that He would save him, his wife, and his possessions – for Hashem has the power to assist and to save. Also, in his going forth from the land (of Cana'an) – regarding which Hashem had commanded him from the outset – because of the famine he committed an iniquity. This is because Hashem would redeem him from death in famine.<sup>4</sup>*

According to Ramban, Avraham committed two sins in his response to the famine. First, he abandoned the Land of Cana'an. Second, he represented Sarah as his sister. Ramban acknowledges that this second sin was inadvertent. It was a calculated strategy. However, it precipitated Paroh taking Sarah into his harem. Ramban's position is that Avraham should have relied upon Hashem to protect him from harm.

**III. Objections to criticism of the Patriarchs**

Rav Moshe Feinstein Zt"l's response to these comments was that they should be erased!<sup>5</sup> Don Yitzchak Abravanel also rejects Ramban's position. His response is based upon two considerations. First, he cites the comments of Rabbaynu Nissim who explains that Avraham acted completely properly in his situation. Second, he objects to Ramban ascribing a sin to Avraham.<sup>6</sup> Rav Moshe based his criticism of Ramban's comments on this second objection.

***And Hashem said to Moshe and to Aharon: Since you did not work to make them have faith in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of Bnai Yisrael, therefore, you will not bring this assembly to***

<sup>3</sup> This interpretation of Avraham's strategy is suggested by Rabbaynu Nissim ben Reuven Gerondi (Ran), *Commentary on Sefer Beresheit* 12:11-13.

<sup>4</sup> Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), *Commentary on Sefer Beresheit* 12:10.

<sup>5</sup> Rav Yisroel Chait shared Rav Moshe's comments with me. I asked if he had heard his rebbe's remarks first-hand. He responded that he had and quoted Rav Moshe verbatim in the original Yiddish.

<sup>6</sup> Don Yitzchak Abravanel, *Commentary on Sefer Beresheit*, Parshat Lech Lecha.

*the land that I gave to you. (Sefer BeMidbar 20:12)*<sup>7</sup>

### III. The Patriarchs are not above sin

This second objection is odd. It seems to attribute infallibility to Avraham. The Torah does not regard any human being as above sin. The Torah describes Moshe as that greatest of all prophets. "There did not arise another prophet in Israel like Moshe who Hashem knew face to face."<sup>8</sup> Yet, the Torah ascribes sin to Moshe. In the above passage, Hashem addresses Moshe and Aharon. He tells them that they will not bring the nation into the Land of Canaan because they sinned and failed to sanctify Hashem before the people. If even Moshe is capable of sin, why can Ramban not criticize Avraham's behavior? In order to answer this question, we must more carefully consider Hashem's comments to Moshe and Aharon.

We will begin with a brief outline of the circumstances in which the sin was committed. The Jewish people were in the wilderness. They were camped at a location that did not have a water supply. They complained to Moshe and criticized him for bringing them to such a place. Hashem instructed Moshe to take his staff, to join with Aharon, and gather the people before an appointed rock. He should speak to the rock and it will give forth water. Moshe and Aharon gathered the people before the rock. Moshe then rebuked them. He described them as rebels. He challenged them rhetorically, "Will we bring water forth from this rock?" He then struck the rock with his staff and water came forth.

### IV. Moshe's sin

The passages do not clearly identify the aspect of Moshe's behavior that was sinful. Because of this ambiguity the commentators present a number of opinions. Rambam explains that Moshe's sin was that he became angry with the people and described them as rebels. In Moshe, this behavior was a desecration of Hashem's name.

*They learned from all his movements and words. Through them, they hoped to merit riches in this world and the next. How could he express anger, it is among the wicked behaviors!...*

*(And) he was not speaking with simple people and not with those who lack all virtue. Rather, (he spoke) with people whom the least among them was comparable to Yechezkiel the son of Buzi. All that he said or did they studied.*

*When they saw that he was angry they said about him... he is not one who has deficient character traits. Were it not that he knew that Hashem had become angry with us for asking for water... he (Moshe) would not have been angry. But we do not find that Hashem, the Exalted One, in speaking to him (Moshe) was angry or outraged...<sup>9</sup>*

According to Rambam, Moshe was a model for the people. He taught the people the Torah he received from Hashem. He also taught the people through demonstration. His actions and words provided instruction. The people understood Moshe's greatness and gave their attention to his actions and words. They studied them. Moshe's sin was that in his anger he

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<sup>7</sup> Various translations of this passage are suggested by the commentators. This translation is based upon Rabbaynu Sa'adia Gaon and Ralbag.

<sup>8</sup> Sefer Devarim 34:10.

<sup>9</sup> Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Commentary on the Mishne*, Introduction to Mesechet Avot, chapter 4.

communicated to the people a false message. His actions suggested that Hashem was angry with the nation.

## V. Two principles of Biblical study

We can extract two very important principles from Rambam's comments:

- The actions and behaviors of the righteous should be studied. They provide lessons in proper conduct and insight into true values. Study should focus not only upon the actions of Moshe but upon those of other *tzadikim* – righteous individuals – in the Torah.
- When the righteous sin, as did Moshe, the Torah must be explicit in identifying the behavior as sinful. The Torah is completely frank about Moshe's sin and reiterates it multiple times. This is because the *tzadikim* in the Torah are intended to be studied as role models. If their sins are not openly acknowledged by the Torah, then in seeking to emulate their righteousness we will assimilate their flaws.

Now, Abravanel's criticism of Ramban is understood. He is not suggesting that Avraham is above sin. The Torah notes his errors and alludes to his failings. However, ultimately, we are expected to learn from Avraham's actions. We can assume that if Avraham had sinned in the Egypt episode, the Torah would have explicitly faulted him. Abravanel's criticism is that the Torah does not indicate that Avraham sinned in this incident. Therefore, Ramban does not have the authority to ascribe sin to him. Furthermore, in ascribing sin to Avraham, Ramban undermines the Torah's objective. Its

objective is that we should study, understand, and emulate Avraham. If Ramban's position is adopted, rather than emulate Avraham's behavior we will disown it.<sup>10</sup>

***And it was in the days of the judging of the judges that there was a famine in the land. A man from Bet Lechem, Yehudah, went to dwell in the fields of Moav – he, his wife, and his two sons. (Megilat Ruth 1:1)***

## VI. The marginalization of leaders

To this point we have discussed methodology in the study of Torah. Rav Moshe Feinstein and Abravanel criticized Ramban for apparently abandoning this method. We cannot know how Ramban would respond to this criticism. However, it is unlikely that he would dispute its basic premise. He would agree that, in general, we study the lives and actions of the *tzadikim* in the Torah and learn from them. Unfortunately, in our times, some "scholars" reject this premise. Let us consider this modern phenomenon.

The first passage of Megilat Ruth tells us that the events it describes took place during the period of the *Shoftim* – the Judges. The *Shoftim* led the nation after the death of Yehoshua. They continued to provide leadership until this role was assumed by Samuel, the Prophet – Shemuel HaNavi.

Commenting of the above passage the midrash declares, "Woe is upon the generation that judges its judges".<sup>11</sup> The message of the midrash is that the spiritual leadership of the *Shoftim* was compromised by the people's attitude toward them. They were very critical of the *Shoftim* and sought to find fault in these leaders. Through

<sup>10</sup> Rav Chait reported that Rav Moshe explained his own criticism of Ramban in this manner.

<sup>11</sup>Midrash Rabba, Megilat Ruth Introduction, 1. The comment of the midrash is based upon an ambiguity in the phrasing of the passage. The phrase "judging of the judges" can mean the judges were performing judgement or it can mean the judges were being judged.

diminishing the spiritual stature of these leaders, the people weakened their spiritual authority.

### **VII. Responding to inconvenient truths**

This phenomenon needs to be understood. Why did the people denigrate and dismiss the moral authority of their leaders? This is a predictable response to confrontation with inconvenient truths. The responsibility of the judges was to lead; this included rebuking the people when appropriate. When rebuked we can respond by giving our attention to the issue and reassessing our actions. Alternatively, we can respond by discrediting our critic and thereby, dismissing his unsettling reproach.

The same dynamic can also influence our study of the Torah. The Torah's objective is not to teach us self-evident and universally appealing lessons. Hashem gave us the Torah because we are challenged in seeking and finding the truth. Therefore, it is inevitable that at times the views and values of the Torah will conflict with our own. How do we respond to these inconvenient truths?

Some will respond by finding fault in the messenger and the message. The behaviors of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs will be dismissed as expressions of cultural biases. The laws of the Torah that conflict with our own values will be cast aside as residue from an archaic, less enlightened era.

This response is both self-serving and dishonest. It is self-serving because it is motivated by resistance to considering inconvenient truths. It is dishonest, because we should expect that a revealed Torah will conflict with our own human and more limited perceptions and positions. Those conflicts are not suggestive of obsolescence; they are consequences of the Torah's Divine origin.

A more honest approach is to recognize that inevitably some aspects of the Torah will be difficult for us to understand from our contemporary perspective. Nonetheless, these aspects should be honestly and objectively considered. Through this approach we can discover the wisdom of the Torah and refine our own views and values.

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